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MY BEEF WITH GEORGE MONBIOT

Many, many people have forwarded me the latest piece by George Monbiot and asked me to comment, so here it is.

At first, I felt incredibly frustrated because Robb Wolf and I address his worldview

in our book, Sacred Cow – and this really is a battle of worldviews.

George is of the view that nature (wild animals) is more important than human livelihoods and our nutritional status… and that uprooting people who live in rural communities, dishonoring their way of life and food culture, and testing unproven food like substances on them all in an effort to preserve wilderness is perfectly noble.

Robb and I on the other hand believe that sustainable regional food systems that take the local environment, human nutrition, food culture, and economy into account are the right path forward.

I see no discussion of food sovereignty in Monbiot's plan, and in fact I see him as incredibly dangerous to the billions of humans on the planet who rely on the nutrients in meat and on livestock for their economic survival. It shocks me that The Guardian gives him so much airtime, or that anybody actually takes him seriously.

In his most recent advertisement for his book, George has published another article in The Guardian – a publication which has taken money from animal rights groups to produce anti-meat editorial, certainly questioning journalistic integrity. He claims that organic and grass-fed beef and lamb are the WORST possible farm products.

The most damaging farm products?
Organic, pasture-fed beef and lamb
George Monbiot

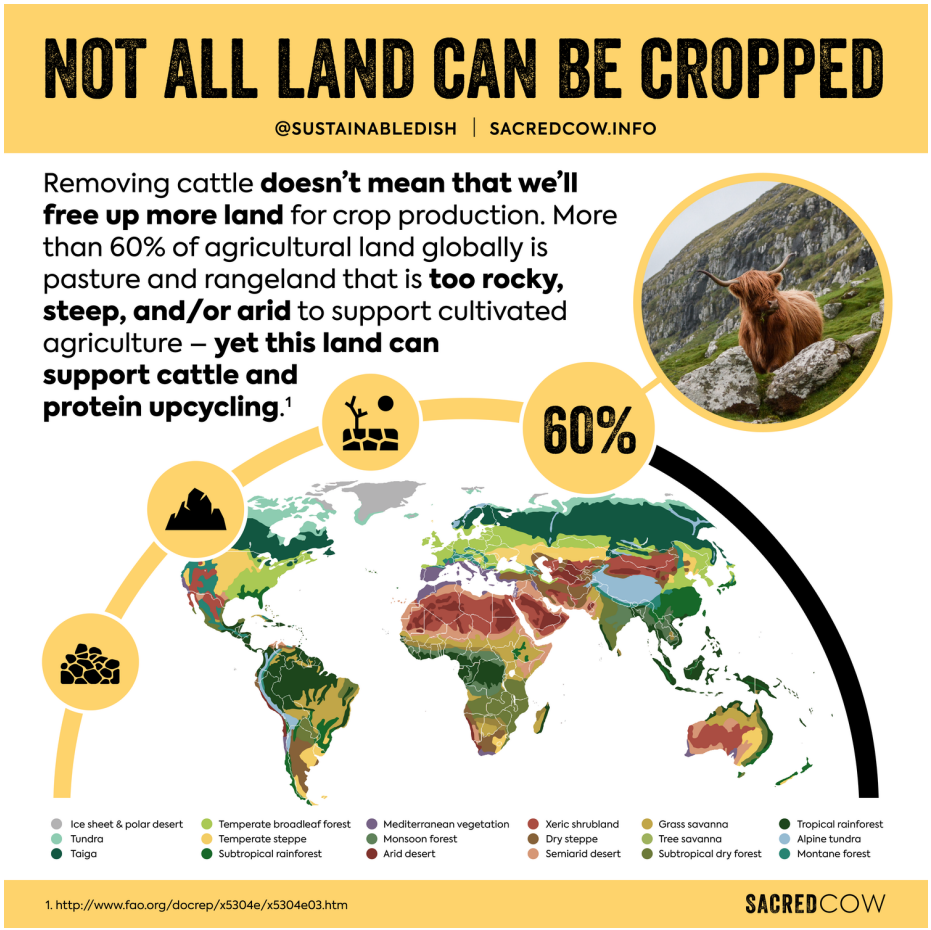
Let's break this down.

First of all, I get how people like and listen to George. He seems like an expert and has a simple solution to cleanse our souls of the very food which has sustained us for 3.5 million years, yet causes immense guilt in many people today. Add in the climate change question, and the simple solution – let's just eliminate them all – seems like the magic bullet.

The problem is, he has zero education or experience in agriculture at all. He also has no education or experience in nutrition or on the topic of food equity.

In his article, he claims that the land use of grazing animals is inefficient compared to arable crops, yet he fails to mention that the majority of our agricultural land on the planet is ONLY suitable to grazing animals. This is because it's either too rocky, hilly, dry or otherwise unsuitable to arable farming.

This oversimplification and complete omission of the facts invalidates a large portion of his argument resulting in unethical journalism – **and he should know this**.



He then starts to mix criticisms of typical livestock production with pasture raised, using whichever process suits his narrative the best. He cites one article from 1994 saying that grazing animals in Western America contribute to the decline of wildlife.

However, the 2021 systematic review of 154 peer-reviewed articles between 1998 and 2018 tells a different story. It was called: **An economic valuation of federal and private grazing land ecosystem services supported by beef cattle ranching in the United States.**

The authors, in discussing the rangeland used by grazing animals, state the following: "We estimate the economic value of this land use to be $17.5 billion for wildlife recreation, $3.8 billion for forage production, and $3.2 billion for other ecosystem services related to the conservation of biodiversity—a combined total of $24.5 billion. Ecosystem services from federal rangelands in 16 western states accounted for 35% of the total value. Ecosystem services per beef cow and per

kilogram of retail beef were estimated to be $1,043.35 and $2.74, respectively." In essence the rangelands used by grazing animals provide a myriad of benefits in addition to high quality and nutrient dense foods.

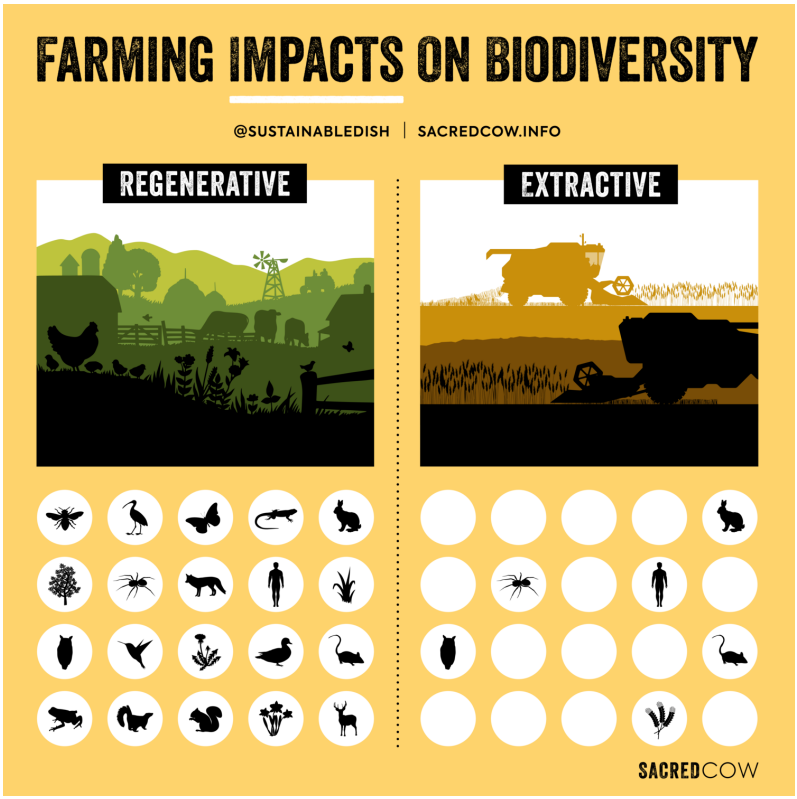
George, you need to consider ALL the evidence, not just cherry pick a study from 1994 to prove your point.

He then blames ranchers for the loss of large predators while ignoring the public who also live in rural areas and have been loudly pushing back against the introduction of wolves and lynx.

How would this work for young children waiting for the school bus in the morning? Runners?

George then talks about killing tools of canisters of sodium cyanide planted in the ground to poison animals, but strangely misses the point that pesticides and insecticides in crop farming are destroying our pollinator populations, killing birds, running off into streams and rivers, and none of this is part of the mission of organic and pasture-based regenerative grazing protocols.

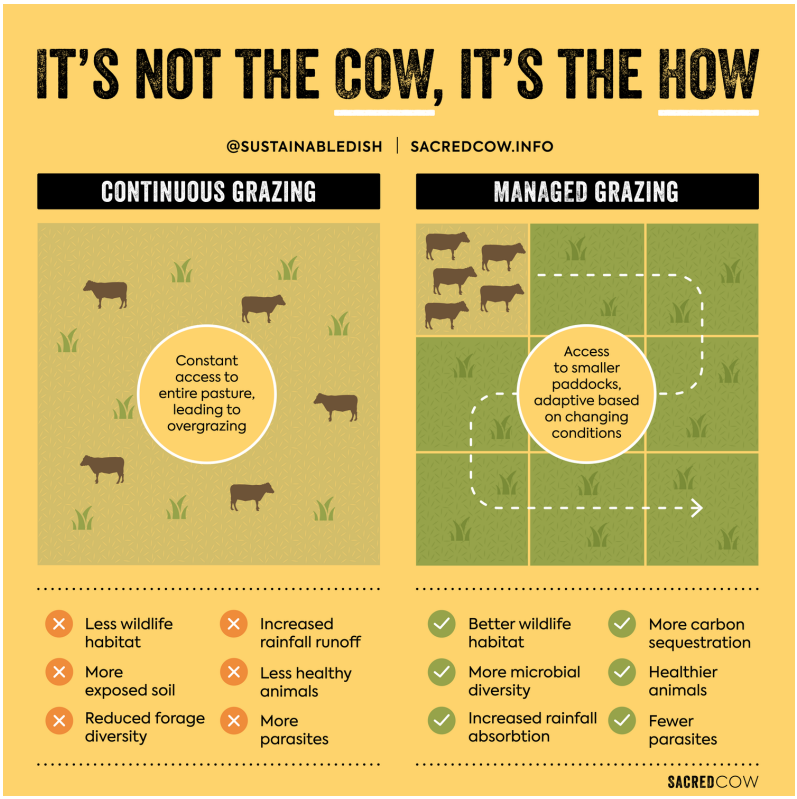
In fact, grazing animals increase biodiversity as opposed to extractive row crop agriculture.



He uses the inefficiency of the uplands of the UK as a reason that farmers need not exist, and talks about the inefficiencies of Knepp rewilding which only produces 54kg of meat per hectare.

I've been to Knepp, and although they are producing some meat, **that is not at the core of their mission and they are not a truly regenerative farm because they are not moving the animals**. They are hardly practicing the types of production we see in the US at places like White Oak Pastures.

He further goes on to say that regenerative farming is the most destructive industry on Earth – *with zero evidence*. His next sentence is that livestock grazing is the primary reason for land degradation – however it's not the cow, it's the how.



When cattle are managed property, they are an ecosystem win, as I illustrated above in the systematic review. George is also forgetting to mention that monocropping is also a massive ecological disaster. He cites commentary instead of science to back up his claims.

Next, he claims that the UK would be better off in forest instead of being grazed by sheep which he claims only supply just over 1% of the UK's food in terms of calories.

But again, this is misleading because lamb and mutton are low calorie foods and the majority of the UK diet is ultra-processed, nutrient poor junk food. Is it better that humans eat junk food instead of nutrient-dense meat?

Don't forget that nutrient deficiencies happen even in high-income countries like England, where 23% of pregnant women and 14% of non-pregnant women need more iron – **the best way to get iron is in the form of red meat.** *George forgot that part.*

Furthermore, George says that livestock are inefficient with feed, which makes

sense if you just look at pounds of food per acre or calories per acre.

But the big problem is that we don't need more calories or pounds of food, we need more nutrients per acre.

Given that grazing animals can convert food we can't eat on land we can't crop into nutrient dense food while also improving biodiversity and increasing ecosystem function, I see no logic to his argument.

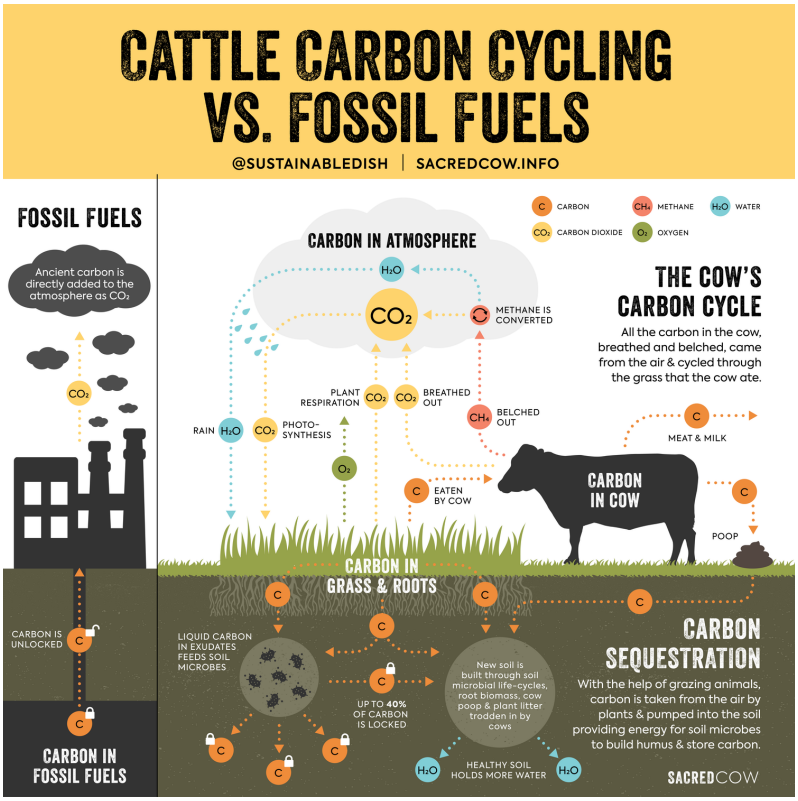
Additionally, when livestock are fed grains, their feed conversion rate is incredibly efficient. Feedlot finished beef in the US has a FCR of 2.5 to 1. This means it only takes 2.5 pounds of edible grain per one pound of beef.

It doesn't take a graduate degree in nutrition to realize that 1lb of beef is far more valuable to a human than 2.5lbs of nutrient poor corn. Globally, only 14% of what livestock are fed competes with humans for food.

Livestock, especially grazing animals, are nutrient upcyclers.

Then he rails on methane, again without context.

The methane from cattle is part of a biogenic cycle, recycled into the environment – a very different process than the emissions from fossil fuels.



It's really important to provide context and not oversimplify things to make your side of the story sell better. As a journalist, it's critical to adhere to an ethical code, and clearly he is not according to the Society of Professional Journalists.

He cites one paper that looked at the C02 reductions that would happen if we all shifted to a vegan diet, however it didn't calculate the nutritional cost of this shift, nor the fact that 85% of people going vegan give it up after 3 months.

One study cited below that looked at eliminating all animal-sourced foods from the US diet found that emissions would only be reduced by 2.6%, yet nutrient deficiencies would increase, and total calories and carbohydrate intake would increase. **This is definitely not desirable in a country where 70% of our citizens are overweight or obese and simultaneously suffering from nutrient**

deficiencies.

In closing, George says we're all in a bubble of delusion about where our food comes from and how it's produced, and that we have a bucolic fantasy which is among the greatest threats to life on earth.

George, I'd like to suggest you're the one who is delusional.

P.S. – My challenge to the Guardian – please give back the funding you got from animal-rights groups and follow the ethical practices outlined by the Society of Professional Journalists, which means providing balance and context to your stories. Stop giving the microphone to someone like George, who clearly is trying to sell his book and agenda which is incredibly insulting to the hard-working people all over the world who are producing important food for the public.

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22 thoughts on "My Beef with George Monbiot"

PHYLLIS
AUGUST 25, 2022 AT 1:05 PM

Brilliant, as always.
Thank you!!!

Reply

FRANK LEPAVE
AUGUST 25, 2022 AT 5:33 PM

I can never forget George once claiming that sheep numbers had doubled in

Wales in a 6 month period. Yes indeed the ewes had had lambs. He is a complete ignoramus about agriculture. Take a walk around the hills, rewilding has been going on in Britain since the 1840s when serious food importing started. Scrub and forest are growing in what were sheep pastures, wildlife has returned.

Reply

DAVID HINSHELWOOD
AUGUST 26, 2022 AT 4:32 AM

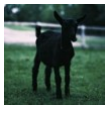
A superbly written, well balanced article.
Thank you for challenging the single argument, simplistic, idealistic viewpoint of George and the Guardian.
It is becoming ever more tiresome whereby “activist experts” are using mainstream media to promote their own agenda & their own commercial gain.

Reply

JOE DENNEHY
AUGUST 26, 2022 AT 9:51 AM

Great article, I’m surprised it was published

Reply



MARK
SEPTEMBER 5, 2022 AT 7:33 AM

I feel sorry that you had to read Monbiot’s article to compose a rebuttal. He

is an elitist twat. I can't stand anything he has to say.

Reply

DAN WHITTET
AUGUST 26, 2022 AT 9:35 PM

A very thought provoking essay. I appreciate your considered analysis of the "easy" solutions to sustainable food production and will do more rigorous research before taking a position. Well done!

Reply

MARTIN HOLE
AUGUST 27, 2022 AT 2:34 AM

I am an organic farmer and greatly enjoyed Monbiots provocation. (I am not a turkey) The view above though is closer to reality… for the time being. But we all need to be on a journey to better practice and a nature dense countryside!

Reply

IAN HOWIE
AUGUST 27, 2022 AT 8:03 AM

George Monbiot gets paid to write rubbish for the Guardian, if he didn't write rubbish the Guardian would not pay him. QED

As some one who has a bit of a science back-ground and for several decades produced beef from land that could not grow crops, to rubbish farming as he

does, it's quite clear that he is extremely selective in what he quotes which is quite appalling as people who know no better believe what he writes and says. Unfortunately the farming industry is very bad at explaining itself to the public and head-line writers and journalists exploit this and are among the industry's worsts enemies as they create unjustified innuendoes in peoples minds .
I heard him accusing sheep in the Welsh mountains as being the cause of the River Severn floods, but that argument was a fallacy as the River Thames was also flooded at the same time and there are very few sheep along the Thames Valley.

Reply

ANTHONY BYARS
AUGUST 28, 2022 AT 9:38 AM

Great rebuttal.

Reply

JON THOMPSON
AUGUST 28, 2022 AT 11:22 AM

The brief disclaimer at the very end of this post says, " Read my full disclosure/ disclaimer here." But there doesn't seem to be any active link. How can I access the full disclosure/disclaimer?

Reply

JOSH JORGENSEN
SEPTEMBER 14, 2022 AT 3:49 PM

You can read it here.

Reply

MARTIN BAILEY
AUGUST 29, 2022 AT 4:25 AM

There is no doubt that grazing of the uplands in the UK has destroyed entire ecosystems and we should be moving away from this destructive practice for the very limited food it produces. Also, lynx and wolves are not going to be a threat to people if there is plenty of wild prey available, which there would have to be before any reintroduction was considered. Interestingly, it would be feasible to reintroduce lynx to the UK now, as they would find sufficient prey and nobody would even know they were here (but they would reduce our high roe/muntjac deer numbers).

Reply

STEPHEN TROAKE
AUGUST 30, 2022 AT 2:49 AM

Do you have links to back up your statements in “my Beef with George monbiot”?

Reply

JOSH JORGENSEN
SEPTEMBER 14, 2022 AT 3:48 PM

The best place to find all the evidence for these claims is in the book Sacred Cow! Check it out here.

Reply

DA TONER
SEPTEMBER 16, 2022 AT 4:38 PM

I'm glad you're not mentioning your book, cause otherwise people can think that you're only sta… ow.. wait …

Reply

JOAN
AUGUST 30, 2022 AT 6:09 AM

Excellent article, really telling the truth as opposed to George Manbiot's unfounded ravings. Wonder who is behind him? There is more to this story, you only have to know what Bill Gates is about!

Reply

PAUL WHITE
AUGUST 30, 2022 AT 7:47 AM

Great piece and once again shows Monbiot for what he is; a delusioned amateur when it comes to rural matters

Reply

DANIEL R

AUGUST 30, 2022 AT 2:34 PM

I believe this is a very well written rebuttal. Telling the truth is very important, otherwise you create a large part of the population whom just turn off.

Reply

ALEC

SEPTEMBER 6, 2022 AT 5:07 AM

I'm becoming ever more convinced that Monbiot is a sleeper for the Flat Earth Society, so ill founded and scurrilous are his ever expanding fringe views.

Reply

THOMAS

SEPTEMBER 12, 2022 AT 3:38 AM

Very nice article, thank you!

Reply

THUMBERLEY

NOVEMBER 12, 2022 AT 6:32 AM

I love how you make clear that ruminant methane is part of a natural cycle. In

fact, all emissions are part of a natural cycle, including the CO2 from fossil fuels! In the future, long after civilisation has ceased to exist, phytoplankton will deposit our erstwhile emissions at the bottom of the sea, so we don't need to worry. But that's what the climate alarmists don't want us to know.

Reply

JAMIE BG
FEBRUARY 23, 2023 AT 2:45 PM

Excellent article, with some great infographics that really clarify the information. I think it's dangerous that people are reading his books and articles and becoming incredibly misinformed, whereas they should be reading your book and other like Dirt to Soil and Hoofprints on the Land, etc!

Reply

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